

Slug-gate verdict

By Cameron Lucadou-Wells

Department of Health senior officials have been cleared of deliberately misleading a Parliamentary inquiry into the forced closure of I Cook Foods.

But the department didn't escape criticism in the inquiry's second report into the matter known as 'slug-gate'.

The inquiry examined the closure of the Dandenong-based ICF kitchen by health authorities in response to the death of a Knox Private Hospital patient Jean Painter with listeriosis in early 2019.

In tabling the second report, inquiry chair

evidence in the first inquiry in 2020 led to "unnecessary confusion".

They didn't invalidate the inquiry's previous findings however, she said.

After the 2020 inquiry, media outlets revealed a report by Knox Council environmental health officer Ray Christy to the health department on the day of ICF's closure that suggested Mrs Painter didn't eat ICF's meals.

This contradicted Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton's inquiry evidence that ICF was the hospital's sole food supplier.

The Christy report, which listed seven other suppliers, was not disclosed to the first inquiry.

The inquiry found "no reason to believe that evidence from the Department of Health

officials was deliberately intended to obstruct the inquiry or constituted a contempt of Parliament," Ms Patten said.

It criticised the four-week gap between the listeria notification and the health department requesting an inspection of Knox Private Hospital.

Serious allegations of impropriety were also made, such as Greater Dandenong Council food inspectors editing video evidence to be allegedly used in a criminal trial as well as a slug being planted on the factory floor.

These claims were "just outside the remit" of the inquiry, Ms Patten said.

Liberal members dissented in a minority report, which recommended an external in-

vestigative agency to further examine the allegations.

They say there are still questions to be answered.

They noted that no other patient at the hospital contracted listeria despite ICF supplying hundreds of meals a day for several weeks after Mrs Painter's illness.

The department showed a "gross and actionable failure of communication and process", the minority report stated.

"It is a matter of great concern that Professor Sutton's incorrect evidence was allowed to stand as part of the record for 14 months."

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